

## INTRODUCTION

by Maryemma Graham

This special issue of *Callaloo* offers selected papers from the International Symposium on Richard Wright, held November 21–23, 1985, at the University of Mississippi. The symposium, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Wright's death, was the first international conference on a major black writer in the United States. This event was also the first time Wright's native Mississippi saluted him as a writer. The credit for this achievement goes to a small band of people who constitute the Afro-American Studies Program at the legendary "Ole Miss," with the cooperation of the Department of English, the Afro-American Studies Program made it clear that the Wright Symposium was indeed part of the wave of the future. As guest editor of this issue of *Callaloo*, I would like to discuss what I consider to be the essence of the Wright Symposium and its importance to current debates in Afro-American Studies and to Afro-American literary theory and cultural studies.

The symposium focused, in the main, on Wright's intellectual and artistic evolution and the inter-disciplinary importance of his canon. The symposium also examined the impact of ideology and its relationship to literary studies in general and to Afro-American literary theory in particular. Chief among these is the construction of an appropriate paradigm for looking at Wright, one that examines aesthetic concerns within the context of the social and political realities that shaped Wright's world and being. Finally, the symposium was an indication of the pervasive influence of major bodies of theory (including linguistic and communication theory, Marxism, Afro-American cultural theory, post-structuralism, feminism) or the lack thereof on our understanding of historical reality, the literary text, human behavior (both collective and individual), culture and social change.

Why is Wright important? Despite the myriad choices he made throughout his life, his early life — his apprentice years — found him part of a sociohistorical process that sanctioned both the method and style of his art. His membership in that vast community of black people who migrated from the poverty and terror of Mississippi to the uncertainty of Chicago made him privy to one of the most significant social transformations in American society. Amiri Baraka says in his essay "*Black Boy* as Slave Narrative, *Black Boy* as Anti-Imperialist Narrative" that the reasons for this flight of black people are what make Wright's work so real. "They are," according to Baraka, "the underlying material conditions that he has tapped and . . . given eloquent voice to."

Born into a poverty stricken sharecropper's family near Natchez, Wright was Mississippi's archetypal Black Boy. After spending his childhood in several places, including Memphis, Tennessee, Elaine and West Helena, Arkansas, Wright completed

his elementary schooling in Jackson, Mississippi, where he would receive his only formal education. He was in his late teens by then, close to young adulthood.

Wright spent two years in Memphis before going to Chicago in 1927. The ten years in Chicago were not just a period of growth and maturation. Perhaps no other period in his life would be as important as this in terms of his intellectual and political development, his artistic and technical training. All of these came together in a very special kind of mold which created that man whom the world would find hard to forget. Wright was just about to launch his career officially when in 1937 he left Chicago for New York, where he would spend another ten years before leaving the country permanently for France. That New York period corresponds with his years as a well established, successful writer, the first important black writer to whom the literary world had given national and international attention. The achievement of fame and success did not resolve certain personal and political contradictions, however, and Wright thought that he might find refuge from them by moving his family to Europe (and he did so in 1947). He spent his years in France writing prolifically, especially non-fiction, and devoting more and more time to issues of significance to the then developing Third World before returning to poetry shortly before his death on November 22, 1960. Wright left a legacy of five novels, two volumes of short stories, two autobiographies, and six other works of non-fiction prose. With these, his long list of credits as a journalist, and the large volume of poems, articles, essays, lectures, book reviews, and miscellaneous writings, he became the most celebrated and revered Afro-American writer of the twentieth century.

My students have often complained that reading Wright made them uncomfortable, more so, in fact, than any other author they had ever read. But as writer John A. Williams points out in his essay in this issue of *Callaloo*, Wright is suppose to make one feel uneasy. He was steeped in his profession as a journalist whose news stories were almost always about black people. It was this training and technique that he transferred to his fiction, according to Williams, which brought him more enemies than friends. Wright used the mass media to validate the reality of the black experience in his fictional works. This reality, especially the powerlessness of black people in America, is also the reason why, says Sri Lankan poet and critic Wimal Dissanayake, Wright became one of the most widely known and discussed writers in the Third World. Dissanayake's comments are revealing in this regard:

The essence of *Native Son*, in my judgment, is Bigger Thomas' realization of his identity and how it is related to the concept of power. . . . Bigger Thomas is seeking to assert his identity in a society which denies him his identity; he is seeking to attain a sense of visibility in a world which has cast him into the shadows of invisibility. In order for Bigger to realize his identity and attain visibility, he has to subvert the cultural discourse into which he has been born. The need for subverting the dominant cultural discourse so as to create a more satisfying human one is acutely felt in most Third World countries which are still struggling with the forces of colonialism despite their liberation from foreign rule. It is largely for this reason that Richard Wright has struck a deep chord of response in many intellectuals and writers in the Third World.

Like the student or general reader, the critic does not escape these feelings of discomfort. It is a discomfort that comes from deciding whether to reaffirm Wright's fictional reality or deny it; whether to locate the critical parallels between Wright's intellectual and political experiences and the Black experience today; whether to link Wright directly with movement and change, rebellion and liberation, or to give him the escapist justification of moving toward some higher consciousness, one dominated by ambiguity and personal self-fulfillment. Perhaps the ultimate feeling of discomfort is having to choose Wright's identity as a Marxist and radical black nationalist rather than the man "who tried to be a communist," who was totally disillusioned with "the God that failed." These questions, far from being extraliterary, as they are sometimes labeled, have implications for the way the critic selects various aesthetic theories as he or she seeks to "explain" a given text.

Among many contemporary Wright scholars, there is general agreement that an analytical model is needed, a model which can address the relationship between the real world and the world of the artistic imagination (as derived from selective/fictional memory, historical consciousness, etc.), or, as Jerry Ward explains in his essay in this issue, between "form and content and between form and forms of response." Earlier critics could elect to examine the ideological and political issues raised by Wright's work and its literary/aesthetic features as separate functions, and thereby arrive at totally different assessments. Today's critics cannot ignore the interpenetration of these aspects and are required to integrate the "new" knowledge derived from literary and social theory with the "old."

In the half-century of criticism since Wright's prize-winning "Fire and Cloud," much has changed and much has remained the same. One thing that has not changed is the recognition that Wright's accomplishments were indeed monumental.

What has changed recently in the scholarly community is the intensity of ideological debate, which was once ascribed to political activists. One of the certain contributions of Black Studies in the Academy is its capacity to force to the forefront the discussion of ideological pre-dispositions and underlying assumptions that shape consciousness and critical thought. Such a Black Studies imperative pervaded the symposium and manifested itself in healthy debates and exchanges of ideas.

In a sense, Margaret Walker's comment in her symposium keynote that Wright's greatest challenge is "in the nature and use of his imagination as a Marxist and a black radical" underscores the key ideological issue confronting Wright Studies. This issue – the use of Marxism as an interpretive tool for the black experience – is linked to two common assumptions regarding Wright. The first is that Wright's role in social and intellectual history is largely viewed in terms of his interpretation of the culture and consciousness of black people during a particular period in the black experience. Wright learned most and wrote best, many argue, when he was guided by a Marxist vision of the world during the period when he was actively involved in the Communist Party of the 1930s. It is important to point out that his involvement was not without struggle, in terms of both his own individualism and the perceived errors of the communist organization; it was this struggle which eventually led to his withdrawal from party membership. Nevertheless, these ideological and political preferences highlight questions central to Wright Studies today, just as they were key

to most papers that were presented and the many debates that were engaged. This issue was articulated in many forms: the relationship between social commitment and aesthetic vision, universality and particularity of theme and subject matter, autobiography and the writing of fiction, popular versus elitist consciousness and vision, vernacular versus literary art, reception theory versus the authority of the text, and the necessity of defining race, class, and gender oppression in relation to the theory and practice of literature.

The second assumption has to do with the reconstruction of the history of Afro-American literary criticism. Here Wright bears both a subject and an object relationship. Houston Baker's analysis of paradigmatic changes or generational shifts in Afro-American literary criticism over the last four decades is instructive. In the three basic movements Baker discusses, "Integrationist Poetics," "Black Aesthetic," and "Reconstructionist," Wright's critical writing belongs to the first or "Integrationist Poetics." Baker apparently links Wright's communist idealism with an assimilationist position or the philosophy of democratic pluralism, characteristic of such critics as Arthur P. Davis. These positions are similar in that they have as their implicit goal raceless, classless society, which eliminated the need for a specific "Negro literature" as such.

Another useful way of understanding the concept of generational shifts is to trace the history of the critical response to Wright's work. Perhaps no other single author has been the object of inquiry for so many different generations of scholars and writers. The biographical essay by Yoshinobu Hakutani that provides the "Introduction" to *Critical Essays on Richard Wright* gives an excellent summation of the changes in the literary assessment of Wright's canon. These changes we can attribute to opposing tendencies in literary criticism and interpretive theory.

Taken together these two assumptions – Wright's relationship to black culture and black consciousness, and the critical community's efforts to define Afro-American criticism – explain another important trend. Scholars in this field of study who mainly focus on individual biography or specific literary texts feel urgently the need to have a much more sophisticated framework or theory for studying the various aspects of the Afro-American experience. This also explains why these scholars argue vigorously when alternative theories – often called paradigms – are presented.

The search for such a theory becomes a clear agenda item for Wright Studies, as well as for literary criticism and Black Studies in general. Included in the Ole Miss symposium on Wright were panels that focused on an analysis of certain assumptions in the past history of Wright scholarship and offered a challenge for new interpretations. The twelve symposiums covered four major areas: biographical studies; theories of art and society; Wright's literary art; and his critical reception, legacy and spheres of influence. Although individual, formally prepared papers formed the bulk of these sessions, there was a degree of flexibility in the method and manner of presenters. Members of the Southside Writers Group and close friends of Wright opened the symposium by sharing carefully guarded reminiscences, providing a very special kind of intimacy for those who never knew or met Richard Wright. Among this group were Essie Ward Davis, Russell Marshall, Sidney Williams, St. Clair Drake, Lawrence Reddick, and the late Fern Gayden. It was partly at Gayden's in-

sistence that we included such a panel, and, although terminally ill, she saw herself a medium through which Wright could again speak to us.

Although it would be impossible to relive the intensity of the experience in November 1985, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the range of questions that are confronting teachers, students and scholars of Wright. In doing so, these articles contribute to a future development of a deeper understanding of the Wright canon. They also highlight the need for a common consensus of vision, a new paradigm.

One set of questions pertains to Wright's fictional vision. Thadious M. Davis, John M. Reilly, and Donald B. Gibson find a key in the black South. Gibson and Reilly focus directly on the relationship between the real world of Wright's South and process of self-creation in Wright's autobiographical and non-fiction texts, *Black Boy* and *The Color Curtain*. For Gibson, *Black Boy* is a great achievement because in it Wright shows himself to be aware of the personal and social explanations for his strong sense of individualism. There is a dialectical relationship between his parents' failure to nurture and provide for him and the concrete situation of black people in the rural South. The tension in this book is therefore between Wright's defense of his own personal development and his separation from black people *and* his protest against the dehumanizing conditions that prevailed against "all black boys and girls, men and women."

A somewhat different, but no less intriguing, interpretation of Wright's exile literature is offered by Reilly. Wright's own personal experience, his intensely intellectual temperament, and his growing disillusionment with political movements provoked him into a near state of crisis during the years after his move to Paris. Wright was able to counter this with the compelling new subject of the Third World. But the work that resulted in *The Color Curtain*, *Black Power*, and *White Man Listen* could not be defined as conventional journalistic reports. Reilly argues that "Richard Wright undertook an adaptation of conventions that eventually converted journalism into a vehicle for a theory of contemporary reality inspired by a vision of a new people entering history." Despite some fairly significant weaknesses pointed out by Reilly, form and purpose come together for Wright in these latter works to produce a singular achievement in non-fiction art.

One of the specific ways in which the articles in this issue argue for a new paradigm for interpreting Wright is through their emphasis on stylistics and structure. Two papers are included here among the several presented at the symposium that offer new readings of Wright. Both papers argue against fixed interpretations of a text while they question the basic assumptions underlying these interpretations.

James A. Miller suggests that authorial intention may not necessarily be reflected in any single language system or individual speech of a character. Most readings of the conclusion to *Native Son* identify authorial intention with the speech of Bigger's lawyer Boris Max. Max becomes Bigger's voice; he speaks for him, telling us what Wright would have us believe. Miller suggests that we shift to a view or paradigm of Afro-American expressive culture, in this case a dynamic call-and-response pattern operating between a speaker and an audience. We would then conclude that Bigger is indeed a typically articulate and responsive member of the "black, urban, male,

lumpenproletariat." The other side of this dialectic is Bigger's perceptions of the white world, one which initially mystifies him and which becomes demystified in Bigger's consciousness as the story evolves.

DeCosta-Willis offers a very convincing interpretation of Wright's characterization of women. Acknowledging Wright's "violently masculine, patriarchal and machoistic fictional world," DeCosta-Willis details how "he converts his women characters into dramatic representations of primal forces – hunger, lust, fear and anger – which shape human destiny." These images are all derived from Wright's conceptualization of the black woman as mother – a conception that highlights much contemporary discussion of women, the reverence for motherhood in the South, and the traditional role of the black woman as mother.

The essay by Robert Bone comments upon the intellectual traditions that shaped Wright's life and art, traditions by which he must ultimately be judged. Bone's essay also serves as an excellent background history of an entire movement that he labels the "Chicago Renaissance." Of these three arts movements, the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicago Renaissance, and the Black Arts Movement, the Chicago Renaissance (it claims Margaret Walker, Theodore Ward, Frank Marshall Davis, St. Clair Drake, Horace Cayton, and others in addition to Richard Wright) reflects far more of the influence of radical social ideas on literature than either of the other two. Bone's essay indicates the need for similar studies in Afro-American intellectual history before we can fully understand the impact and importance of black people's arts movements in the twentieth century.

Jerry Ward's survey is an appropriate conclusion to the special issue of *Callaloo*. Ward's article stresses the value of the critical enterprise in regard to issues such as canon formation, emerging paradigms, and the quest for power and cultural hegemony. But Ward also stresses the role of the critic as a carrier and transmitter of ideas and values and as a voice governed by a set of laws that cannot be set outside of an historical or social process. Ward's position signals future directions of literary criticism on Wright. Such position is vital for future Wright studies. It will assist the critic in acknowledging the "real" and "implied" reader of the Wright text, in understanding "Wright's shifting ideology and aesthetic, and in understanding his use of literature to intensify race and class consciousness to affirm the necessity of art in human existence."

During the months since the Wright Symposium, many have remarked that the ideological debates, the questions and concerns which were expressed either in formal presentations or in the rather heated exchanges during discussion periods signify a revival in Black Studies scholarship throughout this country and the world. That Wright stands at the center of these debates and questions is sufficient justification for claiming his continued literary and intellectual importance. We are encouraged by this sign, false though it may be, and see it as an opportunity to reemphasize the areas for future study outlined by George Kent over fifteen years ago and presented to us by Jerry Ward:

Kent saw the need for A) more biographical and bibliographical studies, B) a definitive standard edition of Wright's work, C) full-length studies of Wright's reading, of his use of the social

sciences, and of his relations with the Communist Party, and D) briefer studies of Wright's psychology, development of character, "effectiveness of style in relationship to intention," naturalism in his work, his influence on other writers, revaluations of his short stories, novels, autobiography, poetry, non-fiction, and comparative studies of published works with manuscript versions. To Kent's listing I would add only E) studies of folklore in Wright's work, specialized studies or film, international reception of Wright's work, and empirical and theoretical studies reading in social context.

Wright Studies should and will move forward from this symposium at a much faster pace. The kind of self-consciousness that so many of these papers call for as necessary to pull us toward a common goal as a community of scholars is not easily achieved. It is quite possible that Wright's ultimate contribution to us is the intensity of his commitment, the constant search for clarity of vision, and an undying faith in the language of freedom. Wright stands for movement, change, a state of always becoming in our work and in our lives. His reconstitution of these as an expressive act of the highest order is his principal importance to us as cultural workers and agents of social change:

The dynamic of this change is rooted in the freedom struggle, the fight to emancipate self and community from hostile conditions. Symbolically Wright in his creative expression and concretely in his life dealt extensively with flight as movement away from racist terror and class exploitation – away from the South, away from racist ideas and values, away from the USA, away from provincialism. His flight was also to something, essentially to the ultimate conditions of freedom as promised by the West at her best. This flight factor represents the contradictions of what was wrong versus what was (W)right, an always hoped for dream, an elusive set of values always propelling him forward, a quest for a utopia which can lead one to seek private personal fulfillment as much as objective historical change in the social environment.

These words by Gerald McWorter in a closing panel of the Symposium make it virtually impossible to deny such a vital tradition – one in which Wright takes the lead; one which joins critics and readers, students and teachers in a common bond.

#### Works Cited

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